

Casual Encounters: The Representations of Queer Counterpublics in Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* and Edmund White's *Chaos*

Robert Bitsko

Focusing on popular queer fiction, this article uses the research of Michael Warner to examine distinct spheres of queer sociality, which is the umbrella term used to discuss any and all queer interactions, whether physical or not. It argues that Warner's theory of public and counterpublic spaces in queer domains, while perhaps requiring an update to better reflect the ever-changing sociality of the internet and social media of today, indeed helps ultimately map the fictional zones of queer sociality, or queer interactions, in Edmund White's *Chaos* and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*. How these zones are manifested and explored by White and Holleran is further explored by this article using the work of Michael Warner, who is interested in the notion of world-making within queer communities. It gathers Warner's claims and applies them to the past with Holleran's 1978 novel and to the present day with White's 2007 novel. By doing so, it approaches these creative queer works from a fresh perspective and in a novel light, thereby establishing a new precedent for observing queer literature; that is, using Warner's notions of queer sociality to better define the interactions between queer characters throughout queer fiction.

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Starting in the 1970s, queer spaces in New York City epitomized not just an avenue for sexual exploration but spaces of community. In this post-Stonewall era, venues such as the Christopher Street adult bookstore in Greenwich Village and the cruising zones of the docks by the Hudson River exemplify these queer social spaces around which communities were built. These venues produced at first a heightened sense of queer visibility and then a sense of specific community around them—hubs of activism, commerce and sociality.

As Michael Warner explores in *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, rezoning laws in the 1980s and early 1990s sought to close or move these traditional areas of queer sociality.¹ Warner argues that this rezoning has had, and will continue to have dire consequences for queer community building. For example, moving queer adult bookstores, which on the inside constituted a venue for the exploration of queer sex, and on the outside, helped give economic viability to the surrounding neighborhood, to mixed-use spaces would have a detrimental effect on queer safety, sexuality and community-building. Queer sex zones would be adjacent to heterosexual ones in distant places, dislodging queer communities such as Christopher Street. At the same moment as these embodied sites of community were being zoned out of existence, social media, in its infancy at the late 20th century, began to open up new forms of communication between individuals through chat rooms and message boards. In the early days of internet sociality, the web was anticipated to become a platform where physical space was no longer a necessity to connect with fellow queers, a forum for a new type of communication, where the sender and the receiver were no longer tethered to physical space.²

This new form of interactivity was briefly examined in Warner's work, "Publics and Counterpublics." In this essay, first published in 2002, Warner begins by reviewing how the word "public" functions in contemporary usage. Warner then differentiates

¹Michael Warner. *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: Free Press, 1999. Print.

²David F. Shaw wrote in 1997 how and in what ways this online sociality might be manifested within queer culture. Please see *Virtual Culture*, edited by Steve Jones. Sage Publications, London, 1997, pp. 133-145.

between “the” public and “a” public as it relates to the creation of an audience and the circulatory nature of discourse—the interactivity between the sender and receiver. After establishing his definitions of what constitutes “a” public, he introduces his concept of “counterpublics.” Warner argues that counterpublics not only have subordinate status to a public, but also instantiate their own specific forms of circulation and modes of discourse—address specific in its speech, topic and theme that would be met with hostility outside of the setting of a counterpublic. Warner describes queer social groups as counterpublics, arguing for the need of specific spaces as a means of socialization and “a poetic function of public discourse,” or as Warner argues, a “world making.”³

Given his descriptions of publics and counterpublics, and the age in which Warner writes—that of the dawn of internet sociality—Warner speculates on how queer reflexive discourses might be manifested online. Warner shrewdly seeks no conclusion; questioning his reader how this specifically temporal and circulatory discourse will be manifested on the internet.⁴ Warner investigates how community building, which at first depended heavily on physical spaces, self-organization and temporality, manifests itself on the internet. How can public address, according to Warner’s definition heavily depends upon print media and its temporal episodes and flows of weekly and daily publications, manifest itself in the constantly “erase history” aspect of the internet? It goes without saying that internet culture has considerably changed from the time of Warner’s initial questions. It is no longer a question of “going on” the internet inasmuch as merely diverting our attention from the physical to electronic, often at the same time. This negotiation, between a physical public and an electronic public, has slowly been depicted within literature. Classically, gay literature has centered around traditional “brick and mortar” establishments: the hedonistic bathhouses in Kramer’s *Faggots* and the clubs in Holleran’s *Dancer From The Dance*, both published in 1978, served to exemplify the embodied sociality crucially prized by Warner in his essay co-authored with Lauren Berlant, “Sex In Public”⁵ and *The Trouble With Normal*. However, one of the authors who represented the embodied sociality of 1970s gay literature, Edmund White, produced a novella, entitled *Chaos: A Novella and Stories* (2007), that explores this new world of online sociality. In part a *roman à clef*, White’s novella features a “sort-of famous” gay author named Jack as he navigates life in his sixties in the 21st century: a life framed by past relationships and current sexual liaisons.⁶ His main sexual and romantic contacts in the novella are Seth, whom he meets via Craig’s List, and Giuseppe, whom he meets by more traditional means—the adult bookstore. This trio personifies the rapidly changing world of sociality within the realm of gay literature.

³ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Winter 2002, p. 82.

⁴ Other scholars have addressed Warner’s publics in relation to the internet. See Samuel A. Chambers, “Democracy and (the) Public(s): Spatializing Politics in the Internet Age,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb., 2005), pp. 125-136.

⁵ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. “Sex In Public,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998), pp. 547-566.

⁶ Edmund White. *Chaos: A Novella and Stories*. New York: Carrol & Graf, 2007, p. 36.

These swiftly changing themes of Internet sociality manifest in White's *Chaos*, and it is a critical charge of contemporary queer theory to readdress the concepts of counterpublics in social media suggestively raised, but not thoroughly explored by Warner in 2002. Drawing upon Warner's concept of a counterpublic, in the following essay I will utilize his frameworks to Edmund White's *Chaos* in order to address whether social media can constitute a counterpublic in social media.

This discourse pertaining to poetic world making is not exclusive to Warner's work. Although Warner never uses the specific terminology, it might be argued that he is addressing a certain concept of utopia. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, published in 2009, states, "*Cruising Utopia's* first move is to describe a modality of queer utopianism that I locate within a historically specific nexus of cultural production before, around, and slightly after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969."⁷ Muñoz continues to suggest, through close readings of works by Frank O'Hara and Andy Warhol, amongst other queer cultural producers, a poetic world making of a future queerness, one in which society has not yet approached, but he argues should be strived for. Muñoz, like Holleran before him, seems to be addressing venues and sites of embodied queer sociality—the club (as site for queer performativity)—as basis for transformative world making.

Such sites of embodied queer sociality have, however, increasingly been under threat. As discussed in "Sex In Public" and *The Trouble With Normal*, formerly queer spaces have disappeared in major metropolitan areas such as New York City in the 1980s and 1990s. Warner states that re-zoning laws have either moved or completely shut down traditional spaces for queer sex, such as adult arcades, bookstores, sex clubs, the riverfront and bathhouses, arguing that these closures have a variety of effects upon the queer counterpublic. Warner writes, "There is very little sense in this country that a public culture of sex might be something to value, something whose accessibility is to be protected."⁸ Warner contends here that queer life can not only find expression through sex in the sense of hormonal release, but also build a distinctive culture; indeed, a world. "They recognize themselves as cultures, with their own knowledges, places, practices, languages, and learned modes of feeling."⁹ Warner is arguing for the importance of the physical space within a queer counterpublic, and that the closure of these specific venues would have a detrimental effect on the counterpublic. Without free access to a physical site for a queer counterpublic, specific attributes—practices, languages, feelings and cultures—would be lost.

The circulation of discourse has changed dramatically in the 21st century, as the internet has arguably become the preferred means of communication in American

⁷ José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁸ Michael Warner. *The Trouble With Normal* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p. 171.

⁹ Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*, p. 177.

society. Not only do desktops enable this communication, but also cell phones, tablets, and laptops, with new devices brought out in regular cycles. Various sociologists have studied this new era of internet sociality in terms of queer sexuality.¹⁰ Of particular interest however is how this new form of discourse is explored in literature using Warner's theories. By applying his notions of the unique characteristics of a queer counterpublic, how might these offer new sites for counterpublic building? Specifically, might it be possible to see queer hook-up sites as queer counterpublics?

Edmund White's *Chaos: A Novella and Stories* is an excellent example of queer sociality at this crossroads. The narrative focuses on Jack, a 64-year old "semi-famous" writer living in New York City as he negotiates his life and sexual liaisons. Given the character's age and location he is a good example of both the embodied queer sociality of the 1970s we explored in *Dancer* and the rise of internet sociality as it relates to queer sexuality. Warner's discussion of embodied queer sociality is best demonstrated in a scene in which Jack, in an adult bookstore to buy a pornographic DVD, encounters the Italian immigrant Giuseppe cruising in the back arcade. Jack, given the time of internet sociality he lives in, is at first taken back by this act. "He was staring intently at Jack out of his dark, long-lashed eyes—a look Jack seldom encountered these days."¹¹ This sentence is particularly telling itself due to its reference to "the look," the particular gaze of such importance to embodied queer sociality in *Dancer from the Dance*. Jack acknowledges that this gaze is a rarity in present-day queer New York; intrigued, he enters a video booth next to Giuseppe. "The wall between any two booths was of frosted glass that left an opening of about six inches high at waste high. There was some complicated way of pushing a button and lighting the room so that the divider went from translucent to transparent, from milk to water, but Jack had never figured it out."¹² This wall, with its opening of six inches, and its translucent/transparent properties might be seen as a traditional circulation of discourse within embodied queer sociality. Two queer spaces, as exemplified in the respective booths, are able to circulate given its translucency and the six-inch opening at waist high. Clearly the maker of these booths, and the arcade in general, are aware of what queer men would be doing within these booths: engaging in queer sex. This opening helps facilitate this sexuality, along with the ability to turn the glass wall from translucent to transparent. It is within the queer individual's discretion whether or not to engage in this behavior, but the bottom line is that this queer sexuality is allowed, even encouraged within this building.

However, this queer social embodiment is not without its conflicts, as represented when Giuseppe enters Jack's viewing booth. "[...] and the Sikh was suddenly

¹⁰ See P.N. Halkitis and J.T. Parsons. "Intentional unsafe sex (barebacking) among HIV-positive gay men who seek sexual partners on the internet." *AIDS Care*, 15(3), 2003, 367-378 and also Campbell, John Edward. *Getting it on online: cyberspace, gay male sexuality, and embodied identity*, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004.

¹¹ White, *Chaos*, p. 70.

¹² White, *Chaos*, p. 72.

pounding on the door and saying loudly, ‘No two people, no two people!’ and Jack said to the boy in his very approximate Italian, ‘Don’t preoccupy yourself, I live just fifty meters from here.’¹³ This intrusion by the security guard, the Sikh, could be seen as hostility within a queer counterpublic. Even though the specific language and ideas of a queer arcade dictate that sexuality would be present within this zone, this zone is still regulated by an outside public, hence the inclusion of the security guard. Perhaps this is the future reality that Warner mentioned in the criminalization of queer sex zones in “Sex in Public” and *The Trouble With Normal*. Either way, the guard’s exclamation of “No two people!” could be viewed as hostility towards queer sexuality, since, at the very least, this type of sexuality requires two people. Tellingly though, this importance of the physical encounter is further exemplified in the fact that Jack lives just “fifty meters away.” This specific line brings to mind Warner’s ideas of the trickle down effect of the closing of bookstores as spaces for social embodiment. Had the bookstore not been there, how would Jack have met Giuseppe? How could Giuseppe, speaking only Italian, navigate an online sociality, which for the most part takes place in the English language? I suggest that this scene in the bookstore illustrates Warner’s notions of embodied sociality within queer counterpublics.

In the context of online sociality, this discourse is best seen in Jack’s relationship with Seth. At the beginning of the novella, Jack meets Seth online, cruising via Craig’s List. Under the heading “Men-for-Men,” Jack finds Seth’s profile, responding to his “twenty-seven-year old six foot three top” posting, offering his money in order to engage in oral sex.¹⁴ This type of interaction is both an extension of and departure from the cruising of the queer counterpublics from the 1970s in Holleran’s novel. In both texts, sites of queer sociality are both embedded within and different from heterosexual sites of sociality. The club in *Dancer* is a club for gay men, yet the building and the street would seem to be a part of a heterosexual culture. The club becomes gay based upon the circulation of discourse within it. Likewise, the internet sociality represented in *Chaos* is both a part of a heteronormative culture and separate from it. Craig’s List, which in and of itself could be seen as a traditional heterosexual platform, then becomes a site for queer sociality by arriving at the men-seeking-men category. This specific category—its language, its ideas, its pictures—clearly exhibits certain features of a queer counterpublic, for its language would be specific to men interested in having sex with men: as we can see in Seth’s posting “twenty-seven year-old six foot three top.” The term top—although it is known to some heterosexuals—is only fully intelligible within a queer context.

This negotiation between the public “Craig’s List’ and the queer counterpublic is also exemplified in the act of cruising itself. Jack searches this website for his next encounter, negotiating the public space of the general website to arrive at his queer space of sociality. This could be seen as a parallel to the street cruising of the 1970s. As in *Dancer From The Dance*, the public streets of Manhattan must be accessed via

¹³ White, *Chaos*, p. 72.

¹⁴ White, *Chaos*, p. 30.

alleyways and side streets to the typical gay cruising area. Both *Dancer* and *Chaos* involve a negotiation between the general public and that of a counterpublic. However, in *Chaos*, no physical space is being accessed in the initial moment of socialization. From the physical act in the novel of viewing the website, typing and moving of the mouse, communication is done within the space of one's home. Cruising can now be done in private.

This new form of socialization raises many questions in regards to Warner's concept of a counterpublic. In "Publics and Counterpublics" Warner states "Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo a circulation [...] But [...]—correspondences, memos, valentines, bills—are not expected to circulate (indeed, circulating them would not only seem strange but highly unethical), and that is why they cannot be said to organize to a public."¹⁵ I would argue that Seth's Craig's List posting could be viewed as a hybrid "valentine" to Jack. I understand that Warner is referencing a valentine that is sent from a specific person and intended for a specific person and is not meant to be fully circulated, however, in both forms of discourse—a valentine and a personal ad—are sent from one individual to another meant to elicit a response from an individual. I would argue that this sort of discourse is apparent within hook-up sites, specifically within the Craig's List of *Chaos*. Seth's profile, although circulated to many, could be argued to elicit a reaction or invitation to a specific person, as represented by Jack's cruising for a sexual partner on Craig's List. This "hybrid valentine" is not meant to assert a direct identity to Warner's notion of a valentine's circulation. I only suggest that a certain form of discourse, such as the valentine, could be applied to *Chaos* given the many similarities to that token of affection and the premise of a personal ad, specifically ads placed online. Warner questions in this section of "Publics and Counterpublics" how specific one-on-one communication can form a public, but online sociality, as can be seen in *Chaos*, complicates this narrative and perhaps requires further investigation in future scholarship.

This online sociality questions conventional representations of queer counterpublics. As the narrator states in *Chaos*, "actual spontaneous encounters in the flesh have been eliminated [...] the photographic portrait had become the only physical reality [...] something to be endured."¹⁶ Here White is referencing the "profile picture" used in various hook-up sites. Jack, at age 64—and from an earlier generation—chooses not to have a picture for any of his profiles. Perhaps this is an exemplification of traditional social embodiment—the choice of an "actual spontaneous encounter" which the text states a specific attribute of online sociality. However, in the world of White's novel, this type of cruising, spontaneous encounters, has mostly vanished, replaced by a computer, mouse and modem.

Warner's speculations on online sociality are mainly concerned with the differing temporalities of print and internet media. "The absence of punctual rhythms may

¹⁵ Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," p. 63.

¹⁶ White, *Chaos*, p. 71.

make it very difficult to connect localized acts of reading to the modes of agency that prevail within the social imagery of modernity.”¹⁷ These “localized acts of reading” could be seen in Jack’s refusal to post a picture of himself online. “Jack never bothered to reply (when asked about a picture online) since his disastrous statistics reveled an outsized waistline, a meaty, sagging chest and a body that outweighed by at least a hundred pounds anyone he would consider bedding. Sometimes he’d write, ‘My statistics are hopeless but the point is I would know how to worship YOUR body.’”¹⁸ Here, Jack’s statistics could be seen as an example of Warner’s localization. Jack refuses to add a physical description or photograph to his profile, choosing to keep himself as untethered to the majority of discourse of circulation within the website. Jack has no desire to create any sort of sociality online beyond initial contact—his only objective is to create a physical encounter. Any language used by Jack, language central to a public and counterpublic, is primarily for embodied sociality, not online sociality. Furthermore, the specific language in the Craig’s List ad, such as Seth’s “twenty-seven year old six-foot-three top,” the sexual community building Warner finds so intrinsic to queer sexuality—the learned aspects of sexuality that only come from the exploration of sex in embodied sociality—isn’t specifically present in initial communication of online sociality. Although only Craig’s List is mentioned within *Chaos*, it would be thought-provoking to see how Jack and Seth’s profiles could be read within the context of other types of hook-up sites—and how Warner’s notions of text-based communications could be represented within profiles where one has to describe likes, and dislikes, sexual positions and turn-ons in pre-determined boxes.

However, as Warner states in “Publics and Counterpublics,” a public is still primarily text based. “The idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text based—even though publics are increasingly organized around visual or audio texts.”¹⁹ I would argue that for a queer counterpublic, and especially for an online queer sociality, “spontaneous” is relative. If a public is created by mere attention, then so are many forms of online sociality: a profile on a hook-up site comes into existence when one reads it. It may have been created minutes or hours before, but it becomes real to the person upon viewing it. This sense is presented within *Chaos*. No time is ever stated in regards to Seth’s Craig’s List posting. We, as the readers, acknowledge its existence when Jack does—which we are left to assume is spontaneously. Also it is important to pay attention to the “text” within Seth’s posting. Although it is text, written words, it should be noted that it is *viewed* on a screen: a computer screen. In a sense a computer screen is just an extension of a television, or a photograph: millions of pixels in collaboration to form the picture of a word. Secondly, Seth’s specific text here forms a picture within Jack’s mind. His profile, “twenty-seven year-old six-foot-three top” is intended to form a picture of someone—imagery has long been a specific component of queer counterpublics. The traditional body language of the street hustler: one hand in the pocket, gazing

¹⁷ Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” p. 66.

¹⁸ White, *Chaos*, p. 71.

¹⁹ Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” p. 51.

for the night's conquest has been replaced by the typed words in an online profile. This specific language taken apart may just seem like pixels, yet in the context of their usage—sender, platform, intention, recipient—creates a picture, a mosaic of a possible queer counterpublic.

This dynamic of online sociality and embodied sociality can be seen in Jack's manuscript on the life of Nijinsky. Jack is writing a biography of the Russian ballet dancer Nijinsky and his collaborator/sexual partner Diaghilev. Speculating on their sexual activities, Jack ponders, "Did Nijinsky submit to Diaghilev's [his lover] eager mouth as Seth to Jack's?"²⁰ Not only does the narrator imply that their relationships are similar, but Jack also attributes various stories about Nijinsky to his own life. White writes that one of Jack's favorite details about the life of Nijinsky is the dance belt story. White writes:

One detail that fascinated him was Nijinsky's dance belt [...] Nijinsky returned to St. Petersburg to dance [...] insisted on wearing what Igor Stravinsky described as "the tightest tights anyone had ever seen (in fact, an athletic support padded with handkerchiefs). In any event Nijinsky scandalized the Imperial Royal Family who were in attendance. Reportedly a Grand Duchess herself asked that Nijinsky be fired for this impertinence."²¹

This specific story may appear as an amusing anecdote, but I would argue that this could be seen as an example of a discourse of circulation. I suggest this dance belt incident could be seen as exhibiting a certain feature of the queer counterpublic—an example of a certain ideology and a circulation of discourse met with hostility outside of the counterpublic. It is important here to differentiate between a traditional queer performance space: that of a drag show or a particular queer theater troupe with that of a theatrical space that features queer elements. Even more so, it is worth noting that ballet is a traditional form of heteronormative public entertainment. Yet, Nijinsky has created a physical discourse between himself and the audience. For example, we could imagine some of the audience of the theater as homosexual, for what is a more classic example of embodied queer sociality than that of the ballet? This audience would serve as the recipient needed to circulate the discourse that started with Nijinsky and his re-appropriation of the dance belt. However, this language, this specific sexuality of the dance belt was seen as "inappropriate" outside of its possible queer counterpublic, in this case, the Imperial Royal Family of Russia. In fact, one could link this display of queer sexuality on the ballet stage with the possible queer counterpublic of online sociality.

Indeed, in White's description of Nijinsky dance belt incident, Jack states "And it was all, it seemed, a mountain made out of a molehill, since Nijinsky's dick was disappointingly small... He should have lived in the Internet era, Jack thought, when one could declare "Tiny Meat" in a profile headline and summon up thirty enthusiastic responses immediately from Chattanooga and Bangkok, Rotterdam and

²⁰ White, *Chaos*, p. 27.

²¹ White, *Chaos*, p. 15.

Dubai.”²² White is not so much preoccupied with penis size but rather with how this description of male anatomy serves as a symbol for queer sexuality, negotiating the differing forms of queer sociality offered by the ballet stage and the internet age. For example, Nijinsky, by padding his dance belt, is seeking to modify how he is perceived by the public, in this case the theatrical public. It is undetermined if he is specifically playing to other queer dancers or audience members, but he most certainly isn’t playing to a heterosexual public, as represented by the Grand Duchess. Equally, as White points out, this behavior could be compared to the era of internet sociality: specifically a queer counterpublic. This comparison is particularly telling in regards to physicality and online sociality. Both these scenarios engage with attributes of a queer counterpublic: both engage with a public, and in both cases demand an intended circulation between a sender and a receiver.

Also pertinent to our discussion is White’s line “from Chattanooga and Bangkok, Rotterdam and Dubai.” His inclusion of these specific cities addresses publics and counterpublics that are very distant from each other and are not necessarily known as queer spaces. This distance illustrates Warner’s stress on how the third sense of a public is formed not just by a physical space but also by mere attention and a relation among strangers. In this case, the relation among strangers is a shared queer sexuality, mere attention being engaged by the intimate profile headline “Tiny Meat.” However, here we also see this is one of the main differences between the embodied sociality of queer counterpublics and that of internet sociality: physical location. Of course, images and descriptions of physical attributes can be found as part of diverse networks of circulation which predate the internet. But with the rise of internet sociality these pictures, alongside video, audio and text, have been able to circulate at greater speeds and to greater distances. One could imagine a similarity between possible pictures referenced within “Tiny Meat’s” profile and Nijinsky’s dance belt: arguably both are a specific language used within a possible queer counterpublic. However, the difference is that with “Tiny Meat’s” profile, this discourse is not longer tethered to an audience member’s sightline within a theater.

Warner argues of publics and counterpublics that, “The circularity is essential to the phenomenon. A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.”²³ Thus circulatory discourse comes into being when the receiver gives it agency to do so. For example, a letter would not be the same form of discourse had the recipient not read it: it would just musings written on paper—mailed off, destination and content unknown. Tellingly, both *Dancer From The Dance* and *Chaos* are bookended by letters, both serving as a response to “the novel” itself. In *Dancer*, two gay men, one living a quiet life in a southern area of the United States communicates via letter with another man living within New York City. The Southern man has written a novel (suggestively, the novel *Dancer* itself) and seeks his friend’s thoughts. In *Chaos*, the novella ends with

²² White, *Chaos*, p. 15.

²³ Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” p. 51.

Seth writing an email back to Jack, responding to the “book” Jack has written entitled *Chaos* (presumably White’s novella itself). In both of these novels their respective authors have utilized specific attributes that align with Warner’s theories regarding the circulatory nature of discourse and its ability to come into being by constituting its own audience. Holleran writes, “I’ve started writing a novel that I want you to read. A gay novel, darling. Bout all of us.”²⁴ On one level this technique creates a metanarrative, a self-referential strand of the novel’s discourse that serves as a story within a story. This technique would function as a creation of a public itself, and a counterpublic at that. On another level, the reader is reading a novel: accessible via any bookstore, available via any public means.²⁵ Yet at the same time, by having characters introduce, or conclude these stories, Holleran places their discourse within a specific counterpublic.

Both of these novels’ characters arguably belong to a queer counterpublic in which their specific dialogue, ideas and mentalities are referenced in their letters. As shown in *Dancer*, the man writing from New York City is currently engaging in embodied queer sociality, while the Southern man has chosen to leave this specific sociality for a different life in the south. This duality is also present in *Chaos*. Seth relates Jack’s sex life to a person stereotypically aligned to queer sociality of New York City. “I guess I can’t get too worried about your—what do you call it?—*chaotic* sex life? That just makes you one more Chelsea fag.”²⁶ White’s specific language here—*Chelsea fag*—would be known specifically to a queer audience, those gay men in New York City familiar with a particular type of gay men known specifically within this queer sociality.

The specific language used in these letters could be seen as aspects of Warner’s main theories regarding counterpublics-- specific modes of address, the possibility of hostility outside of the counterpublic and a poetic world making—all factors leading to the specific discourse essential to queer literature. Holleran writes, as the Southern Man, “However, I must caution you, love: Those things may be amusing to us, but who, after all, wants to read about sissies?” This language parallels Warner’s notion of certain counterpublic discourse being met with hostility outside of the counterpublic. Holleran knowingly acknowledges that his novel would be met with resistance outside of the queer community of the 1970s. Those “things”—bathhouses, sex, clubs, partying, loves—the language itself of these words so a part of this specific group would be met with hostility outside of the counterpublic. Suggestively, Holleran states “read” here, as opposed to “know,” “learn” or “hear” about sissies. He is purposefully acknowledging this circulation of discourse between an author and the reader, leaving any judgments in terms of language and

²⁴ Holleran, *Dancer From the Dance*, p. 14.

²⁵ However, one would have to search within “gay and lesbian literature” within the bookstore, which could be argued as a counterpublic within itself. Also, this ability to pick up a novel at a bookstore is rapidly declining given the closing of many traditional “brick and mortar” bookstores. One would have to specifically search on websites for “gay novels” if one wanted to read this specific genre. In both instances one could argue either way in regards to accessibility of queer fiction.

²⁶ White, *Chaos*, p. 93.

ideas within the realm of the specific discourse: the book and language. By using “read” Holleran keeps fresh in the reader’s mind the importance of language used, so important in Warner’s definition of a counterpublic.

Furthermore, this counterpublic is characterized within the concept of the sender and the receiver. Here, the letter writer who is penning the novel is sending his work to a specific audience—his letter receiver. However, this novel that he has written, has become *the* novel we hold in our hands. This type of discursive circulation, existing in multiple levels at the same time, coming into existence by mere attention, is, again, central to Warner’s concept of a counterpublic. Thematically, this bookending device allows the reader to identify with the two letter writers’ feelings in regards to New York City as a physical space of sociality. As one of the letter writers states, “I had to leave New York, you know, not for any practical reason but for a purely emotional one: I simply couldn’t stand to have it cease to be enchanted to me.”²⁷ New York City not only serves as a destination, but as a specific character in the way it embodies so many of the desires and affiliations of the characters. The embodied sociality of so many of the venues described in the novel—the clubs, the baths, the parks—are intrinsically tied to the characters, their emotions, their world making,

It is telling that Holleran chooses the word “enchanted”: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the root word “enchant” is defined as “to influence irresistibly or powerfully, as if by charm.” I suggest that this terminology is akin to Warner’s notion that a counterpublic reflexively creates its own discourse in relation to a text or object. Both terms, a public and to enchant, require a sender and a receiver, a discourse of circulation and a transformative power. Here, Holleran seems to be stating that New York City, as both a public and as an entity, has come into existence through the transformative effect it has on the novel’s characters. This embodied sociality, this New York City, not only serves as the platform for the discourse of circulation but a discourse of itself. Holleran writes “Those streets, those corners. Malone was possibly more committed to it than any of us—whatever ‘it’ was—”²⁸ Malone, and by extension, all the characters in *Dancer*, became so intrinsically linked to those city streets, those physical spaces become definitive of their characters and embodied within them.

Both novels address the concept of readership: specifically, the problem of viewing queer lives through a heteronormative gaze. One of the letter writers in *Dancer*, upon hearing that the other is writing a novel states “Those things may be amusing to us, but who, after all, wants to read about sissies? Even if people accept fags out of kindness, even if they tolerate the poor dears, they don’t want to know WHAT THEY DO.”²⁹ Seth writes to Jack at the end of the novel “All that sex talk, frankly, kind of disgusts me, especially when you talk about shit we’ve done. Really, really, that shit

²⁷ Holleran, *Dancer From the Dance*, p. 240.

²⁸ Holleran, *Dancer From the Dance*, p. 241.

²⁹ Holleran, *Dancer From the Dance*, p. 14.

seems sort of sketchy and I really don't like the idea of opening up the bedroom door and inviting everyone in from the street to watch you sucking my dick."³⁰ In both of these moments, the reader is forced to examine their own public, having the reader step out of their specific circulatory nature of the discourse of author to reader and address the concept of being a viewer in a larger scheme. The reader is forced to acknowledge how and in what ways they have become a part of those specific practices that the characters don't want to see addressed, namely queer sexuality. I would suggest that this would be an example of Warner's notion of multiple publics coming into existence at the same time, involving both the circuit between the author and the reader and then a reader at large in respects to queer sexuality. Also, these two novels address this notion of a discourse that intends to provoke a reaction in the reader. This is done to introduce the reader to these counterpublics in different contexts. In *Dancer*, by showing the reader the specific attributes of the queer counterpublic—a specific, sexually-inflected language—at the beginning of the text, Holleran again is setting up his counterpublic by moving from a micro to a macro viewpoint, framing his language within the specifics of a dialogue between two people. This introduction serves as a preparatory examination of the specific language and ideas so intrinsic in the formation of a counterpublic. Placing queer sexuality in letterform, between two people, allows the reader to identify queer sexuality in relation to two people, not a public address. What we are reading at the beginning of the novel is a correspondence between two individuals—acclimating the reader to this queer world in a personal context.

Conversely, White's admission of queer sexuality and readership is placed at the end of the novel and further situates the context of queer sexuality in Seth's terms of public and private ("I don't like the idea of opening the bedroom door and inviting everybody in from the street to watch you sucking my dick.") Firstly it is telling how White's concept of "street" differs from Holleran's. In Holleran's novel, the street serves as an extension of the characters' lives: a physical destination that is also a metaphor for loneliness and an avenue for sexual liaisons. The street represents embodied sociality where cruising and socialization form a large part of how the characters define themselves as queers. In White's reference, the street serves as a heterosexual population, the bedroom as a safe enclosure of queer sexuality. This of course might be put in dialogue with Warner's notions of the loss of physical queer spaces within New York City, and Warner's concepts of embodied sociality building. As previously stated, Warner argues that loss of such sites has an ossifying effect, leading to the loss of community building. Perhaps what the reader is seeing in White's novel is the ramifications of this effect: the loss of physical space having an impact of this character's views of sexuality. It is telling that Seth's first objection to the story that is to be published is how it would specifically effect how his queer sexuality is perceived, as opposed to Holleran's characters, who do not seem to mind how they are personally perceived, but how the heterosexual population views queer sexuality more broadly.

³⁰ White, *Chaos*, p. 92.

To address this another way, Seth is concerned about how he is perceived within a heteronormative public, whereas Holleran's characters question how the public views their queer counterpublic as a whole. Seth seems to be concerned with the very notions Warner is addressing, chiefly his statement regarding the importance of a public sexual culture benefiting what goes on "in the bedroom." Warner writes "It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which one's sexuality finds an answering response not just in one another, but in a world of others."³¹ This exemplifies the sexual culture in *Chaos*. As Seth writes to Jack in his email "I'm not saying you're out of touch. You're too much of a vampire to be out of it. You need fresh blood every day. I'm no better, don't get me wrong. I have to hook up three or four times a day."³² Seth finds a kindred spirit in Jack, in least of terms of their sexuality. What is important here is that Seth acknowledges this similarity having had a relationship with Jack, a relationship which is, of course, a form of embodied sociality. Although Seth's view of Jack is shared via an email, a new form of communication by an online sociality, their relationship, and identification as similar sexual people, is only after their physical time spent together. Their experiences, although at first dictated by an online sociality, only grows via an embodied sociality.

Having examined Warner's work in regards to the importance of embodied sociality in regards to queer sociality, the decline of queer spaces within Warner and Berlant's "Sex in Public" and *The Trouble With Normal*, and what constitutes queer counterpublics in "Publics and Counterpublics," I have shown how this scholarship might be put in dialogue with queer literature. While many aspects of both these texts could indicate their participation in forms of discourse associated with queer counterpublics, it would be problematic to simplistically state that the online queer sociality within *Chaos* constitutes a queer counterpublic. I would suggest that in the future scholars could examine how in and what ways publics and counterpublics could be seen within online sociality. At the very least it is important to acknowledge the need to readdress Warner's criteria of "a" public in regards to online sociality. The internet that Warner references in 2002 is not the same as it is in 2013. The full manifestation of this discourse is still being shaped.³³ However, in queer sociality, all of Warner's work values the specific need within queer communities for world-making and community building. As scholars begin to address online queer sociality, I hope to have shown that Warner's stress on the positive aspects of social embodiment—an understanding of oneself and others by means of sexual and social interpersonal communication—should continue to be a part of this discourse. For regardless of physical or online sociality, world-making is dependent upon sociality with others.

³¹ Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*, p. 179.

³² White, *Chaos*, p. 98.

³³ A November 26th 2013 Michelangelo Signorile article for The Huffington Post focuses on the growing trend in queer online sociality within the past four years. Signorile, Michael. "Joel Simkhai, Grindr Founder And CEO, On Gay Social Networking App's Worldwide Impact." HuffPost Gay Voices., 26 Nov. 2013. Web. 6 Dec. 2013.